One Engine, One Radio, Plenty of Bom

by Lt. Sean Rando

We were three weeks into the Kosovo campaign when my pilot and I got our first port call, compliments of an oil-breather-pressure light in our Tomcat, followed by a single-engine divert to Sigonella. As a FAC(A) aircrew, we had originally intended to teach a few lessons to the Serbian forces in Kosovo with our four GBU-12s (500-pound laser-guided bombs) and whatever other ordnance our fragged CAS assets would bring to the party. Instead, we learned a few lessons of our own that night.

We had reported on station 10 miles west of the Albanian-Kosovo border at around 2200. After getting the current situation update, which included medium AAA and SA-6 sites that hadn't been located, we proceeded east into Kosovo at FL240 in search of pre-

briefed artillery emplacements that needed servicing. Five minutes into bad-guy country, my pilot told me we had an oil-breather-pressure light on the right engine. He brought the engine back to idle and evaluated oil pressure according to NATOPS. The light stayed steady and oil pressure was normal. NATOPS says if oil pressure is normal, then assume it is a breather-pressure problem and shut down the affected engine.

Because these pressure switches are notorious for their false indications, it took about half a second to decide that we would leave the engine running, at least until we could get the nose pointed in a better direction, namely back the way we came. We told our wingman what was happening. Then we turned around and secured the right engine.

We were loaded with four GBU-12s, a pair of AIM-9 Sidewinders, an AIM-7 Sparrow, a LANTIRN pod, and about 16,000 pounds of gas. We couldn't maintain FL240 at mil power, so my pilot went to full afterburner on the left engine until we crossed the border. Then we started a gradual descent to 17,000 feet; at mil power, the left engine couldn't keep us any higher than that.

Since we were 200 nm from the ship, we had plenty of time to complete the single-engine cruise checklist and weigh our options. Gas and weather were no problem, so we could divert if we had to. We'd have to jettison our stores if we were to shoot a night, single-engine approach to the ship. Since the air wing was racing through GBU kits, we were told to keep our ordnance and divert to Sigonella. Beautiful, another 200 miles single-engine. I looked for the approach plate, then consulted my handy Garmin GPS.

I gave the field information to my pilot, just like back in the training command. I pulled up the frequencies for approach, tower, and ground, which were all VHF on the Garmin. Our wingman decided to hang on for most of the transit, since he had plenty of gas, too. It's a good thing he did, because soon after establishing comms with Sigonella approach, our back radio died. The front radio is not VHF capable, so we had to ask our wingman for help. They quickly coordinated a UHF frequency for us.

While struggling to understand the Italian controllers, we completed the single-engine landing checklist and confirmed one more time that the short-field arresting gear was in battery. Our wingman returned to the ship when it was clear we would make it to the field. After touchdown, however, we didn't feel the mild tug of the field arresting gear. Instead, the radio filled with "Alpha Juliet Two-Oh-Two, you have fire coming from your back!" After a second or two of checking for other indications inside and outside the cockpit, we realized he was talking about the sparks the hook was making as it dragged down the runway.

My pilot slowed the jet and taxied off the runway, where we spent a half-hour waiting for the ground crew to de-arm us. I had to get out of the jet and pin the gear myself before shutdown because the ground crew there had never pinned a Tomcat before.

Thinking back on that night, I'm glad we had a wingman to help us wade through some of the admin comm while completing checklists. More importantly, they saved us from having to reestablish comms with Sigonella approach control through UHF guard, which would have been difficult at best. I also kicked myself for not having the proper pubs—such as an approach plate—handy. The Garmin GPS helped us with VHF frequencies and field layout, but UHF frequencies would have been nice to have that night, and if it weren't for the nice weather, we might have had to shoot an instrument approach.

Know your diverts cold, and always carry the pubs for those diverts and the local area on every flight. Finally, think twice about sending your wingman home, even when you're sure you have the situation suitcased.

Lt. Rando flies with VF-14.